

CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF FARMING**Purpose**

1. To seek the Committee's views and comments on the long draft of the Forestry Commission's response (Annex A) to the consultation 'Health and Harmony, the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit' (Annex B).

Background

2. 'Health and Harmony' was published on 27 February 2018, with the deadline for consultation responses set for 8 May 2018.
3. This represents the biggest opportunity in generations for a fundamental change in food, farming and environment policy. This is of fundamental importance to forestry and therefore the Forestry Commission and our customers.
4. The potential for forestry includes to break down the artificial divide between agriculture and forestry and move to a new integrated land use policy focussed on incentivising public goods. Such changes could be relatively very advantageous for trees, woodlands and forestry given that currently woodland is ineligible for the vast majority of support available under the current Common Agricultural Policy and the wide range of public (and private) goods that they can deliver.
5. Forestry may also offer an opportunity for some farmers looking to change or diversify their activities and income in light of the withdrawal of direct payments proposed.
6. Many of the wider proposals for increasing the productivity and resilience of farming in this context, such as research and development, innovation, knowledge exchange, skills development, support for new entrants and access to finance are also relevant to forestry which faces many similar challenges.
7. There are also risks to be mitigated, including that the inevitable focus on food and farming obscures what is also important to forestry; that forestry is seen as a competitor rather than a complement to farming; or simply that there is a failure to realise the full potential already described.
8. These are just a few of the points that the attached preliminary long draft Forestry Commission response to the consultation (Annex A) seeks to convey. This has been informed by the well attended forestry stakeholders consultation event on 23 March 2018, the immediate outputs from which are at Annex C.

Next Steps

9. We are working to make the final submission more concise and to focus on the key areas that are of most importance to the Forestry Commission. We currently expect the final submission to be 3 to 4 pages.
10. Defra will use the responses to the consultation to inform the further development of food, farming and environment policy, including the Agriculture bill, expected to be introduced to Parliament this summer. Forestry Commission officials are well engaged with Defra group colleagues in the huge amount of work being done across the Future Farming (and Countryside) Programme which oversees this.

Communications

11. Normally any Forestry Commission response to a formal government consultation such as this would be made internally within government, direct from the Forestry Commission to Defra. Given the unique importance of this consultation and its potential implications for forestry we consider that on this occasion we should publish our response. We understand that this is in line with both Natural England's and the Environment Agency's approaches. The final version will be drafted with this prospect in mind.
12. We also intend to share an advanced copy with Defra officials, including through this Committee meeting, to maintain our agreed 'no surprises' approach. An appropriate media handling strategy will also be agreed with Defra Group comms.
13. We would expect the forestry sector to welcome this, which we would hope might also encourage a full response to the consultation from across the wider forestry sector. We would also expect a positive response from staff as evidence of a confident and assertive Forestry Commission demonstrating its unique forestry expertise.

Recommendations

14. The Committee are invited to:
 - Comment on the long draft consultation response (Annex A) to help with focusing attention on the key issues for the Forestry Commission.
 - Consider whether or not the final response should be published before the consultation closes.
 - Provide delegated authority to the Chair to finalise the response
 - Agree that the final version should be published.

Richard Greenhous
Director of Forest Services
11 April 2018